

New chapter unfolds on Ford Island

By William Cole
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FORD ISLAND — Quarters K, currently home of the U.S. Pacific Fleet submarine force commander, was built over a couple of old coastal defense gun turret emplacements in a neighborhood known as Nob Hill.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the underground rooms served as shelter for Navy families, and the sunken battleship USS Arizona lies just a few hundred feet away.

The swimming pool nearby was in the opening scene of the 1965 epic "In Harm's Way." Close by, too, is the 1920s bungalow that was John Wayne's quarters in the flick.

History is everywhere you turn here on what has been called the "Gettysburg of the Pacific." In recent years some new and very different chapters have been added as part of a public-private redevelopment effort.

The latest example was yesterday's groundbreaking for two new neighborhoods on the 450-acre island. Forest City Military Communities Hawai'i is building 102 homes on 16 acres and renovating 20 historic homes in Nob Hill and 20 more in another neighborhood called Luke Field.

At the southwest side of the island, Forest City is building 129 more homes for Navy families on about 25 acres. The first of the new homes, which Forest City also will manage over 50 years, will be available late this year.

Six years ago, the National Trust for Historic Preservation was so concerned about redevelopment plans for Ford Island that it placed the landmark on its "11 Most Endangered Places" list.

The Navy made revisions to the plan, and with several projects completed or now under way, preservation officials say history and modernization are being accommodated equally well.

"I think they are doing a good job of balancing new needs and new users of Ford Island with the historic significance of the area," said Kiersten Faulkner, executive director of the Historic Hawai'i Foundation.

In particular, there's a "better regard for the patterns of the island — the view planes, the open spaces, preservation of the runway," Faulkner said.

Faulkner also had good things to say about adaptive re-use of historic hangars and buildings by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Pacific Aviation Museum-Pearl Harbor, which opened Dec. 7, 2006, the 65th anniversary of the surprise attack.

"They are taking these historic structures and adapting them to contemporary needs and they are doing it in a way that maintains historic integrity," she said.

U.S. Sen. Daniel Akaka and U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, both Hawai'i Democrats, took part in the groundbreaking ceremony yesterday in the Nob Hill neighborhood, which is primarily a submarine community housing area for senior officers.

After the ceremony, Abercrombie contrasted Ford Island's World War II existence as primarily a strategic location to its new role as a base with more housing.

"Now, we're going to have families here," Abercrombie said, "living what for them can only be a dream in terms of an assignment, living in paradise and probably the most desired location possibly that anyone can imagine and building a real community out here on Ford Island."

As part of a Navy effort to develop Ford Island with more housing and other uses, the service used special legislation passed in 1999 allowing it to sell or lease outlying properties on O'ahu in exchange for \$84 million in infrastructure improvements by Fluor Hawai'i LLC. The old base theater also is being converted into a conference center.

Rear Adm. Townsend G. Alexander, commander of Navy Region Hawai'i, yesterday said the infrastructure improvements that were completed last year have been critical to follow-on construction.

Steve Barker, vice president for development with Forest City, said the Navy in 2003 built 140 townhouses for junior enlisted sailors on Kamehameha Loop. The new north end homes will be for senior enlisted personnel, while the south end will have field grade officer and junior officer single-family homes.

"So what we're doing is we're rounding this out, so every rank has an opportunity to live on Ford Island, which to me, with the views, is a beautiful place to live," Barker said.

The Navy said it has no plans to disturb the historic runway on Ford Island, and historic preservation officials say that's good news. Still awaiting development are about 40 acres that Fluor retained for a combination of townhouses and apartments, officials said.